CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled "Issues & Perspectives in Teaching Writing Skills in English to Students of B.Tech Degree Courses in Kerala", submitted to the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is a record of the original research work done by Ms. Sonia Paul, during the period of her research work in the Department of English & Centre for Research, St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam, under my supervision and guidance. It has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree/Diploma/Associateship/Fellowship or similar title to any candidature of any other university.

Signature of the Guide

Proficiency in English language skills has become one of the key determinants of professional success in the globalised world of today. In fact, the ability to speak and write clearly, and present one's ideas succinctly is valued as a core employability skill, which determines the candidate's chances of getting employed and retaining the job.

Keeping this end in mind, all institutions of higher learning in India have enhanced their efforts to provide the best language learning opportunities for their students. Courses in Communication Skills have been incorporated into the curricula of almost all the programmes offered by the various universities in the country, albeit in different levels and combinations. The success of these courses, which provide guidelines for effective communication, would however depend on the linguistic proficiency, both oral and written, of the students. In reality, these courses presuppose a level of proficiency on the part of the students and are building up on that assumed foundation.

This assumption is very clearly tested in the case of professional colleges, wherein the student community is a heterogeneous group with extreme differences in their linguistic proficiency in English. Language deficiency creates serious problems in the academic performance and the future prospects of the students as well. But very little has been done to study the range and extent of this problem in the engineering colleges in the state of Kerala, and evolve remedial measures.

With the privatization of the higher education sector, the state of Kerala witnessed a phenomenal expansion in the scope of professional education. As per official records, in 2013 Kerala had 154 engineering colleges with a total of 50,944 seats available for engineering aspirants. Considering the huge contribution made by the state towards the technical manpower resources of the nation and the world, efforts have been underway at

the governmental and institutional levels to enhance students' proficiency in the core employability skill of communication in English.

However, developing competence in communication skills in English is very often taken to mean developing competence in speaking skills, and little attention is given to writing skills. It is against this backdrop that the research proposed the hypothesis that the writing skills in English of students at the undergraduate level of engineering programmes in the state are inadequate for academic and professional purposes. Inability to express oneself effectively in written communication could lead to professional setbacks. The country's contribution to research and development, and knowledge-building in engineering and technology will also suffer as a direct consequence of inadequate writing skills.

The research work undertaken focuses on the errors in writing of students in undergraduate engineering programmes in the state of Kerala. It examined the teaching of writing skills in schools, with regard to their effectiveness when put into the perspective of serving as a background for professional education. It also considered the issue of whether the curricula of engineering education provides any scope for developing the writing skills of the students to the level desirable for a professional, and the demands that may be placed on a professional's writing in the actual workplace, as opposed to the academic context in which the instruction takes place. The research also focuses on remedial measures to address the deficiencies identified, and worked on formulating an appropriate methodology which will address the issues in the teaching of writing skills at the undergraduate level of engineering programmes in the state.

The research work estimated the importance of writing skills in English in academic and professional communication, and the differences between the two. It explored the levels of awareness amongst both the student and the teaching community on the importance of writing skills. The level of awareness is partially responsible for the standard of writing, and is also seen as a hindrance to corrective action.

While critically examining the writing competence of students at the undergraduate level, it was possible to identify some of the common trouble spots in students' writing. The effectiveness of Communication Skills courses, delivered as part of the undergraduate engineering curriculum, in improving writing competence was also brought under analysis. The work has suggested how the syllabus for Communication Skills at the undergraduate engineering programme level may be restructured, taking into account both the immediate academic and future professional requirements. It also suggests a teaching methodology, which capitalizes on peer interaction to improve writing skills, and which can be reasonably adapted within the existing framework as well.

The methodology adopted for the research work consisted of surveying existing literature in the field, and studying their implications on the issue on hand. Apart from these theoretical inputs, writing samples were collected from a total of 400 students pursuing different branches of the undergraduate engineering programme at three different colleges in the city of Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala. They were asked to write a short essay, which was then utilized to estimate their ability to express themselves fluently and unambiguously in English.

In order to assess the importance of writing skills in the engineering workplace, thirty professionals, covering the spectrum from junior to senior positions in the industry, with a corresponding range of work experience, were requested to give their feedback on the actual frequency of preparation of different kinds of documents (ranging from letters to reports) in the workplace.

To facilitate an understanding on how writing skills are perceived by school teachers, and to obtain their invaluable expertise on the same, twenty one school teachers, covering the state (both native language i.e. Malayalam, and English medium), CBSE, ICSE, and an international board (viz. British Board), were administered a short questionnaire interview.

The pilot study of the proposed teaching methodology was carried out on a sample size of 120 students, i.e. two classes of 60 students each, of one engineering college in Kochi.

Wherever deemed relevant, the data and corresponding findings have been classified, tabulated and presented with the help of statistical techniques like percentages, pie diagrams and bar diagrams.

The research work is presented in five chapters. A brief overview of each chapter is given below.

- Chapter 1 – The first chapter deals with the evolution of language, and briefly touches upon the theories proposed by linguists for the same. The origin of writing, which is considered a later development; the invention of the alphabet, and its uses in ancient times is then explored. Since the study derives its basic strength from the power of language as a tool for self expression, the rise to power

of various languages in the history of the world and the emergence of English as the lingua franca is studied. The chapter then focuses on how English assumed importance in India, and how it continues to be a language of national importance. The characteristic features of the Indian variety of English are presented for review. One of the significant features of the English language has been how it has been adapted by various countries and cultures of the world, and how English now exists in different varieties across the world. While briefly assessing the problems posed by the co-existence of these different varieties of English, this chapter states the case for what language education should reasonably be expected to do in the situation. Since the focus of the research is on writing, the chapter closes with a discussion on the power of writing, and the power of the written word.

- Chapter 2 – The crux of the second chapter is the history of writing instruction around the world. While in the ancient seats of learning of Greece and Rome, writing instruction was unmistakably secondary to oral skills, writing came to its own in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and this shift is perceivable in writing instruction in English in England and America as well, wherein writing was to begin with an aid for oratorical skills. The focus of the chapter then shifts to the growth and development of the educational system of India, the importance of English in the system, and the problems plaguing English education in the country at present. An analysis of the difference between speech and writing in the context of English language teaching is presented to support the argument that focusing on speaking skills alone will not result in linguistic competence in a

holistic sense. It also mentions how developing writing skills is crucial for developing the knowledge repository in all fields. The last part of the chapter marks the transition to the issue of writing skills in undergraduate engineering programmes in the state of Kerala which is dealt with in the next chapter, by reviewing the growth of technical education in the country and particularly the state of Kerala.

- Chapter 3 – The chapter discusses the issues which are pertinent in English language teaching in undergraduate engineering programmes and analyses the scope of language teaching in the Communication Skills courses prescribed in the syllabi of the different universities in the state. It then proceeds to briefly examine the approaches to writing instruction adopted in schools, and proceeds to present the opinions and beliefs of the school teachers on issues related to the same. The chapter gives the evidence for the inadequate writing competence of students at the undergraduate engineering programme level, and the results of an attitude survey done amongst the students on the issue of language learning and writing competence. The discussion then moves on to the nature of workplace writing, its difference from academic writing, and how despite its low-visibility, workplace writing constitutes an essential element of workplace success. The chapter closes by summing up the issues which plague English language teaching at the school and college levels in the state, which contributes to the dilemma.
- Chapter 4 – The thrust of the fourth chapter is on contemporary observations on the inadequacies of the educational system in India especially with regard to its implications for language teaching. It proceeds to look at the groundwork that

needs to be established before adopting a methodology to improve students writing competence. This is followed by a stage-by-stage explanation of the teaching methodology that may be adopted to build writing competence. The chapter concludes with the observations made while implementing the process.

- Chapter 5 – The final chapter has considered the possible changes that can improve the quality of language teaching in the state, with special attention given to its implications from the perspective of engineering education. As the Communication Skills syllabi of various universities in Kerala and their drawbacks with regard to writing instruction has already been discussed in Chapter 3, this chapter suggests an alternative Communication Skills course which will provide contextual learning, and will thus make language learning and writing instruction a more meaningful experience. The suggested course is graded with the students' progress through the engineering course and is derived from what is needed at each stage, thus making it contextually relevant as well. To add credence to the argument that language teaching should not be ignored at the undergraduate engineering programme level, the chapter briefly explores the language courses prescribed at the undergraduate engineering programme level in foreign countries, where it is compulsory that even native language speakers of English take a course in the same. It also touches upon how language teaching takes place in countries like China, India's biggest competitor in the science and technology sector. The chapter draws to a close by summing up what can be done in schools and colleges to improve students writing competence, and the decisive role of the teacher and the individual in the process.

The major findings of the research can be very briefly summed up as follows:

1. There is a disparity between the ELT methodology practiced in the state and the needs of the learner community – especially in the light of the future career prospects

2. The conventions of technical writing (jargon, organizational styles etc) demand more than a basic level of writing skills, which a majority of the students are not capable of meeting unless measures are taken towards developing basic competency before teaching technical writing

3. The process of translating simple thoughts/ideas into writing is difficult for most students, irrespective of their linguistic proficiency in some cases, as is evidenced in general communication situations (e.g. apology letters) and humanities'subject papers. The predicament in more complex analysis and recording is often worse

4. Inadequate writing skills are very often not an easily noticeable problem. The situations which call for originality in writing are few and far between to begin with. By the time it becomes a necessity, it is too late. What is more, many of the students who speak supposedly 'good' English have serious deficiencies in their writing

5. Students do not have sufficient innate motivation to improve their writing skills, which means it needs to be created from without

6. Time constraints and the heavy load of an engineering curriculum make them apathetic towards language learning

7. The teaching methodology will have to be more learner-centered, activity-based, and will have to depart from conventional methods of theory and practice(e.g. games for vocabulary building as opposed to word lists)

8. More stress should be put upon drafting the content, and not on the externals like the format of a letter, or the structure of a report. The best method would be to evolve the text from the content to the format.

As developing writing competence is essential to academic and professional success, the educational policy at the undergraduate engineering level should reconsider its stance on developing writing skills, and restructure Communication Skills courses in the manner necessary to accommodate this need. Further, the teaching methodology should take into account that it has to cater to a heterogeneous student community, and thus may require a combination of approaches to achieve the desired outcome. The research found that a learner-centered methodology, which builds on peer group interactions for guidance and corrective input, can be more effective than a teacher-dominated one. However, this will require remedial intervention by the teacher at the beginning. It would also involve developing parallel skills like critiquing peer writing and proof reading.

Since at present Communication Skills are not allotted sufficient time in the curricula, it tends to be reduced to another subject to be mastered in theory, rather than a skill to be developed in practice. Hence, an adequate allocation of time for skill development, and effective utilization of alternative resources available for developing writing competence should also be considered while seeking to address this issue. Students should actively and consciously engage with their writing for it to show improvement. The responsibility for the development of writing skills can be more effectively carried out if the onus is equally shared by all the teachers, and the methodology draws on peer support and interaction.

Education is not merely the transfer of information, but also the holistic development of the potential in the individual. The ability to express one's ideas effectively is not only a necessary skill for personal and professional success, but is one that needs to be continuously developed: it needs to be honed throughout one's educational and professional life. However, there is a prima facie responsibility for the education system to equip the individual with the basic competence in this skill as well. The assumption that inputs on developing writing competence and addressing related issues are completed in school is not only wrong, but also detrimental. The research was able to establish that there are inadequacies in the writing skills training imparted at the undergraduate engineering level in the state. Considering the impact this can have not only on the individual's professional success, but also on the discipline's growth and the country's development, it is not wise to ignore writing instruction at this level.

While throwing open the doors of professional education to a larger group of aspirants through privatization and other measures, the education sector of Kerala also has the responsibility to ensure that the students are capable of rising to meet the challenges of their profession, and can contribute to the growth of their respective disciplines by articulating coherently and succinctly in writing as well.

Dr. Celine E.
Associate Professor
Department of English
& Centre for Research
St. Teresa's College, Ernakulam